INTERNATIONAL DECADE 1995-2004

The plight of the world's indigenous people — an estimated 300 million in more than 70 countries — has become a major focus of concern for the international community.

Descendants of the first known humans in their regions, from the Amazon to the Arctic Circle, they once lived isolated existences, free to be different in their cultures, religions, and patterns of economic and social organization.

The modern, industrialized world changed all that. Dispossessed by modernization's thirst for energy, minerals, timber, farmland and living space, millions of indigenous peoples are facing extinction as distinct peoples.

They have been pushed to what the United Nations Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, has called the "the margins of national and international life".

But their voices are finally being heard. Their concerns were on the agenda of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) in June 1992. At the Earth Summit, States acknowledged the need to recognize indigenous people's values, territories, traditional knowledge and subsistence rights. They also admitted that indigenous people have a special relation with the Earth: their ecological knowledge and agricultural systems often play a vital role in promoting sustainable development.

Beginning in 1993, the International Year of the World's Indigenous People, the United Nations started promoting new partnerships to spur global efforts to help address problems of indigenous people in such areas as human rights, environment, development, education and health. It was recommended at the United Nations Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna in 1993, that the International Year be extended into a Decade and that a permanent forum for indigenous peoples be established.

A Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995-2004) proclaimed by the General Assembly in its resolution 48/163 will be launched on 9 December 1994. Under the theme "Indigenous people: a new relationship—partnership in action", the main goal of the Decade is to further cultivate the partnership promoted between indigenous people and the international community during the International Year. It will provide a timeframe to build on the results and lessons of the International Year.

In his speech on the launch of the Year, the Secretary-General emphasized the need for global cooperation: "I believe that the Year will be the starting point for two partnerships", he said, "one between indigenous people and States, and another between indigenous people and the United Nations. Unity through diversity is the only true and enduring unity." The seeds of new partnerships were sown: new partnerships that would be equitable and based on mutual respect and understanding, new partnerships that would allow indigenous people to be consulted and to participate more actively in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

In their struggle to win respect for their ways of life, indigenous people have organized themselves locally, nationally and regionally. And their fight has been recognized in the international sphere as well. The Secretary-General sees the issue of indigenous people as one that cuts across a vast portion of the United Nations agenda.

"If we are serious about development, political participation and human rights", he said, we must address the special situation of indigenous people... One thing is clear: the human and community rights of indigenous people will flourish best in an atmosphere of respect and mutual tolerance."

Draft Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Efforts by the international community to support the cause of indigenous people led to the preparation of a draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations, a subgroup of the United Nations Human Rights Commission. The draft Declaration, which is to be submitted for adoption through the Commission on Human Rights to the Gen-

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eral Assembly, recognizes the aspirations and needs of indigenous peoples and asks States to respect and honour any legal instruments agreed upon by both parties. The Declaration, if adopted, will represent a major success for indigenous communities, since it acknowledges their basic human rights and fundamental freedoms, which are of utmost importance and have been denied to them for centuries. Inclusion of these rights in national legislation as well as their realization will be a significant achievement of the indigenous peoples' struggle. The draft Declaration emphasizes, among other things:

- The right of indigenous people to be free and equal to all other individuals,
- Their right to self-determination: to freely determine their relationships with States and their political status, and to freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development,
- The right of indigenous people to their lands, territories and resources,
- Their right to maintain their distinct identities and characteristics.

Partnership between indigenous people and States

Since the proclamation of the Year, there has been a growing trend towards recognition and acceptance of indigenous people's cultural diversity. An increasing number of Governments are considering their demands and trying to fashion provisions favouring indigenous people's rights. Indigenous communities have been consulted on questions of health, education, agricultural production, arts and crafts, demarcation of lands and indigenous mining zones. Emphasis was put on the participation of indigenous people in finding solutions to their problems in the fields of human rights, environment and development. In most countries where indigenous people live, non-governmental organizations were very active during the Year. Around the world, indigenous people seized this rare opportunity to intensify their campaigns for the recognition of their civil, political, cultural, economic and social rights.

- In Australia, a major accomplishment for the indigenous communities was the adoption by the Australian Parliament of the Native Title Act 1993, which recognizes that Australia was not *terra nullius*, or land belonging to no one, when first settled by the British in the late eighteenth century.
- In Colombia, a Permanent Committee on Indigenous Human Rights was established, and a council was created to assist and monitor mining in indigenous areas. The Government provided legal assistance to indigenous communities in their negotiations with private enterprises for the exploitation of mineral resources in their territories.
- In New Zealand, the Government supported many Maori initiatives in the fields of health, education and environment and provided financial assistance for projects related to these questions.
- In Sweden, a Parliament for Saami indigenous people, established as an advisory group, held its first elections in 1993. The Parliament plays an important role in policy formulation on indigenous issues.

United Nations response

The United Nations system has been actively involved in improving the lives of indigenous people. In the past, when carrying out development projects which were supposed to benefit indigenous populations, international organizations have often overlooked key elements such as community organization and empowerment, participation, territorial security and cultural identity. A new strategy is emerging and the international community is now focusing on self-development. The concept of self-development tries above all to strike a balance between maintaining and strengthening the cultural identity of indigenous communities and improving their economic conditions.

- In Mexico, the United Nations International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) is carrying out a project dealing with the "Development of Indigenous Communities in Puebla". One of the project's goals is to strengthen existing indigenous grass-roots organizations. IFAD offers its own expertise and works closely with the National Indigenist Institute (INI), which engages in many cultural and social projects. The Puebla project has established the Regional Solidarity Fund, thus allowing the indigenous people to participate in the project. The

Fund, run by the indigenous communities themselves, processes credit applications, approves credit and pursues loan recovery. This control over their own funds allows indigenous people to participate significantly in the project's decision-making process.

• The International Labour Organisation (ILO) was the first organization in the United Nations system to act to rectify the situation of indigenous and tribal peoples: it has adopted the only two international legal instruments specifically concerning indigenous and tribal peoples — ILO Conventions 107 and 169. While ILO Convention 107 (1957) promotes integration of indigenous populations, ILO Convention 169 (1989) is based on respect for their cultural diversity and encourages States to use the participatory approach whenever development projects and matters that affect the indigenous and tribal peoples' lives are at stake. ILO has not only set up standards but has developed a mechanism to make sure that the countries which have ratified the Conventions also implement them.

Through technical assistance programmes, ILO is currently providing assistance in drafting legislation for the indigenous peoples in the Russian Federation, and is helping the Government of Guatemala to devise a policy and institutional framework to solve the problems faced by the indigenous peoples in that country.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is providing technical assistance for projects that benefit indigenous communities and is promoting the sharing of knowledge and experience among them. For example, UNDP, in collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), organized a meeting of Mayan leaders, scientists, educators and representatives of international organizations to discuss approaches to participatory development in the five countries of the Mayan region, with the aim of setting up a regional project.

The World Bank has committed itself not to assist development projects that infringe on indigenous peoples' traditional territories unless adequate safeguards are provided, such as, for instance, the demarcation and protection of indigenous lands. It has also encouraged the participation of indigenous peoples and their sharing in the social and economic benefits of the development process.

The International Year: lessons learned

The efforts of the indigenous people led to the proclamation by the United Nations General Assembly of the 1993 International Year for the World's Indigenous People. It was a unique opportunity for indigenous people to promote their fundamental rights before the world community.

The main objective of the Year was to strengthen global cooperation for solving the problems faced by indigenous communities in areas such as human rights, environment, development, education and health.

A special Voluntary Fund was also established to support projects specifically designed for the Year.

Raising awareness in the world community about the situation of indigenous people and widening indigenous people's knowledge of the United Nations system were the two main objectives of the International Year. Meetings of indigenous women, youth and tribal elders were held. Issues of concern to the indigenous communities, such as preservation of their culture, land rights, forest conservation and environmental protection, education and health, were discussed.

In the short period of one year dedicated to the world's indigenous people, many successful activities were undertaken by indigenous people themselves and non-indigenous people to build a new partnership.

The Decade and the future

The International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995-2004) will be a time for the United Nations system, Governments and all major actors to take up the challenge facing them and to further commit themselves to the question of the promotion and the protection of the human rights of indigenous people. Governments and international agencies alike should make sure that the issue of indigenous people is included in their programmes, that they adopt resolutions on indigenous concerns and that they work in a constructive manner towards the goals of the Decade.

The Decade will contribute to the elimination of some deficiencies observed during the Year:

- Need for the communication networks to be strengthened to ensure proper provision of information to the indigenous communities. Some questions related to strategic dissemination of information were raised, e.g. how to better disseminate the information and how to reach the indigenous communities, who, very often, live in remote areas. More documents should be translated into indigenous languages for the information to have the expected impact;
- Need for financial resources from international organizations, Governments, non-governmental organizations and the private sector to finance projects;
- Need for the different organizations to include indigenous peoples in their programmes, to consult and negotiate with them on developing projects that affect their lives.

The Decade should place priority on the new role of indigenous people as decision makers and beneficiaries of national, regional and international development activities. Cooperation, consultation and full participation of indigenous people in the planning, implementation and evaluation of development projects affecting them should be the basis of all activities. A greater number of indigenous staff members should be recruited in all the relevant United Nations offices and agencies. The Working Group on Indigenous Populations stressed the importance of securing adequate financial and human resources for achieving the goals of the Decade and for the successful carrying out of the activities to be included in the programme of action.

It was suggested that the Voluntary Fund for the Decade be jointly administered by indigenous and non-indigenous actors.

At its last meeting, the Working Group on Indigenous Populations proposed that the International Day for Indigenous People be proclaimed by the General Assembly and observed annually on 9 August. That day marks the beginning of the recognition of indigenous people and their struggle for dignity by the United Nations system. It is the anniversary of the first meeting of the Working Group, which took place in 1982.

Another objective of the Decade is the recommendation for the establishment of a permanent forum in the United Nations system with equitable representation of indigenous and non-indigenous actors. The forum is expected to play an important role in operational coordination for development and other issues.

As Ingrid Washinawatok, Chairperson of the NGO Committee on the United Nations International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, said during the 47th Annual DPI/NGO Conference (New York, 20-22 September 1994): "We must unlock the silence of our people. Unlock the silence and let us speak to the world." After a year devoted by the international community to their issues, the indigenous people feel they still have not got their message across. However, indigenous people have the will and determination to make their voices heard, to further open the channels of communication with the international community, to be better understood and to become full partners in today's world.

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